

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 127 340

TM 005 425

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TITLE The CAEL Project: A Case Study.
PUB DATE [Apr 76]
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (60th, San Francisco, California, April 19-23, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Innovation; Higher Education; *Learning Experience; *Post Secondary Education; Program Evaluation; Special Degree Programs; Student Characteristics; *Student Experience

IDENTIFIERS *Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning; *Experiential Learning

ABSTRACT

This presentation focuses on impressions and findings resulting in activities in the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning Project, which is briefly described. Comments are made about nontraditional programs in higher education that provide opportunities and assessment for experiential learning particularly and centers on five topics: (1) Structure and proliferation of experiential learning programs; (2) Emergence of student as advocate; (3) Characteristics of students enrolled in such programs; (4) Focus of experiential education programs; and (5) Defining criteria of success for such programs. Suggestions are offered for improvement of programs especially as they might relate to student characteristics and eventual success in the programs. (Author/RC)

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Session #20.17 Explorations of Correlates of
Success in Nontraditional
Postsecondary Education (Symposium)

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The CAEL Project: A Case Study

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I would like to do what many are guilty of at this type of symposium. I'm not going to speak to the general topic. One reason is that after hearing all the data and summaries previously presented -- all of which represent fine institutional research efforts sorely needed in this area -- I'm not going to fall victim to the "dragging coals to Newcastle" syndrome. Aubrey, John, Dave, and Ernie, because of their program involvement, know more about the correlates of success at their specific institutions than I do, and their institutions are a fair representation of the types of nontraditional programs that exist today in higher education.

Correlates of success imply criteria of success. Also, I think we realize that correlates can go down the drain if institutional arthritis thwarts students from activating what they might bring to a university of program. Here is where I can add some information. So I would like to talk first about developments the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning (CAEL) project has facilitated in the area of student and program evaluation and then what we have learned in the past two years.

CAEL, originally funded by the Carnegie Corporation in March 1974 and now funded by Carnegie, Lilly, Ford, and the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, began as a cooperative project of

Educational Testing Service and ten task force institutions, such as Antioch College, El Paso Community College, Florida International University, California State University and Colleges, and the Massachusetts State College System. Two institutions represented on this panel, Empire State and Metropolitan State are also on this task force.

CAEL has become the primary focus throughout the country for exchange of information about assessment of experiential learning. During its first year, the project received some 2,000 requests for information from agencies, institutions, and individuals. CAEL issues a Newsletter to facilitate communication, and it convenes two Assembly meetings each year. The CAEL Assembly includes close to 250 institutions, many of which describe themselves as nontraditional institutions or institutions with nontraditional programs.

Early in the project four priority areas were established by the CAEL Steering Committee. These were:

1. Assessing the achievement of interpersonal skills
2. Use of portfolios in assessing nonsponsored learning
3. Assessing the learning outcomes of work or field experience
4. Use of expert judgment in assessing learning outcomes

During 1974-75, ETS staff assigned to CAEL, working with a large number of educators, researchers, and other specialists from CAEL member institutions, contributed to these priority areas through a series of ten working papers. In addition, CAEL commissioned 20 special projects on individual campuses and provided small grants to support these undertakings. Five special project reports have so far resulted.

In the second year of CAEL, the following areas were designed for project focus in addition to Assembly clearinghouse activities:

1. Validation. Evaluation and revision of assessment procedures and materials developed in the first year of the project (through widespread experimental use in Assembly institutions and through a series of field studies).
2. Operational Models. Cooperative work on problems of integrating new assessment techniques into existing institutional administrative procedures, academic policies, and organizational structures.
3. Faculty Development. Improvement of faculty understanding of rationales for experiential learning and techniques for assessing learning outcomes.

During the past year, activities of the CAEL Assembly have expanded substantially. For example, 54 institutions are involved in tryout of materials, 24 in field research, 16 in faculty development, and 12 in operational models.

The CAEL project has as its focus one aspect of nontraditional education -- experiential education. Therefore my remarks concerning correlates of success, success criteria, and program evaluation and evolution will deal with programs that involve students in some type of experiential learning. This learning may result from experiences prior to college entry such as work, volunteer efforts, hobbies, and travel as well as experiences sponsored by institutions such as field experiences, independent projects, and crosscultural studies. I will organize my impressions around these topics:

1. Structure and proliferation of experiential learning programs
2. Emergence of student as advocate
3. Characteristics of students enrolled in such programs
4. Focus of experiential education programs
5. Defining criteria of success for such programs

Structure and proliferation of experiential learning programs

Our panel has already noted that the correlates and criteria of success are unextricably bound to program structure and characteristics. This is a simple notion but often forgotten when looking at where students come from and where they are going. This idea coupled with the rapidity with which experiential programs are multiplying gives me cause for alarm. Peter Meyer in his book, Awarding College Credit for Non-College Learning, notes that Brooklyn College began crediting prior learning around 20 years ago. Most of us know that in the 1920's the University of Cincinnati designed the first college-sponsored work study program in the United States. Field experiences and work study have steadily increased in institutions since the Cincinnati experiment so that now most traditional and non-traditional institutions have some sort of sponsored learning experience outside of the classroom.

The recognition of prior learning, however, was a long time coming after Brooklyn College. It wasn't until the late sixties and early seventies that the crediting of noncollege learning became recognized as a viable option for adults, in terms of shortening the time needed to earn a degree. At a rough count, from that time until now, the number of programs offering credit for prior learning is approximately 200. Because

prior learning assessment is in its infancy, and field experience programs are burgeoning and coming of age, few educators and program directors have had time, or the data, to sit back and reflect on where this is all leading. Some of the exceptions to this observation are sitting up here right now.

At any rate, we have learned through the CAEL project that haste in putting such experiential programs into operation may cause serious problems. Many programs are poorly conceptualized. This is particularly true in the case of traditional institutions with nontraditional components. Many times field experience and credit for prior learning are tacked on as an addendum or a cafeteria offering to recruit new and different students to stem declining enrollments. In institutions such as these, the new students show disappointment with the lack of a rationale for experiential learning, poor assessment practices, and lack of integration of experiential learning with classroom experiences. Students become disenchanted and either drop out or turn to the more traditional degree plans at their institutions. The persistent ones who fall back to traditional study are usually white, middle-class males who desperately need a degree for job advancement or a change in career, or those individuals who have a healthy number of previous credits in traditional academic settings. By the way, this is one of the changes that non-traditional higher education has wrought -- the blanket acceptance of transfer credit for previous college work.

I guess what I am saying is that if you don't believe in experiential education and if it is not integrated with the traditional curricula, then don't try it. For that matter, if you do try it, correlates and

criteria of success will make no sense since program weaknesses will give you serindipitous findings. In those cases where institutions are chartered innovative or where traditional institutions have blended new programs with old in such a way that program evaluation and change is attuned to student clientele, one can be more assured of the success of students in terms of their personal satisfaction as well as their further education and future employment opportunities.

Emergence of student as advocate

In this age of consumerism, students are becoming more articulate about what they expect from an education and, in fact, once they are enrolled, they are deeply concerned about getting their money's worth and whether there is "truth in advertising." They find an experiential learning option described in a brochure; they apply for it. After enrollment they discover arrangements are tenuous, assessment is shoddy, and that they learn nothing from field placement or portfolio assessment. And let me say here that the assessment of prior learning and field experience learning should not be a set of administrative procedures whereby students obtain credits and or advanced standing. The assessment process itself should be a learning experience that can be wedded with the student's educational and career goals. Selling credits strictly for time-shortening a degree is an innovation that would be most characteristic of a poorly conceptualized program with a weak educational rationale. I think we all feel this type of nontraditional option has no place in higher education.

I suppose that if we are to take the quote from the Commission, pertaining to full educational opportunity for all, that Dave Forman

shared with us, we have to mean it when we design nontraditional programs. Brochures that contain descriptions and the educational rationales of programs should accurately reflect reality and the commitment of the offering institution. Full opportunity implies this type of honesty and also implies (pardon the change of Cy Houle's title) "flexibility by design."

Characteristics of student clientele

At this point in time, several student profiles have emerged from our experiences during the CAEL project. Prior learning assessment options are usually exercised by white, middle-class males or middle-class homemakers with previous college work who feel it is time for their second chance at obtaining a credential. In field experience programs, we find younger students who have always been restless in a classroom and who are oriented toward doing. These students often have had significant extracurricular achievements during their adolescence and are now ready for more of the same. Another profile is emerging though. Students who might be classified as lower class or lower middle-class, and are attending community colleges because of pinches in family funds, seem attracted to field experience because of the bread-and-butter attraction of having a work experience that may lead to a job or may pay them while they are getting credit for the experience.

The profiles we have uncovered pose some interesting challenges for the future. We know that individuals that succeed in nontraditional programs are much like their cohorts in traditional programs. We still don't know if we are saving more individuals that are associated with outgroups from educational extinction than traditional programs might. We do know that nontraditional programs are attracting more of these

individuals than traditional programs. Still in nontraditional education, we have to find ways of becoming more facile at accommodating minorities, senior citizens, welfare recipients; and, for that matter, prisoners. Again, if we are to live up to the spirit of the Commission's question, we must find ways of doing this. Some of you may not think you have the faculty resources, time, or the space to do this, and you may think why should you. Well, I am sure you have seen the gloomy picture that NIE has painted about the declining enrollment of 18 year-olds. The baby boom is over; the 18 year-olds you expect to apply as freshman in 1985 have not been born. They are not here. Therefore, more and more middle-class males and females will be eager to take up this slack if you let them and plan for them. There is a catch. Since the minority birth rate has not decreased, we can also expect more young people coming to college who will be the first in their family to do so, and, as Bud Hodgkinson of NIE says, more and more students who don't speak the language we have been used to hearing and who eat strange things for breakfast.

From the data laid out for us today and from CAEL studies, I don't think we know for certain that we found the best ways of receiving these people, dealing with their individual learning needs, and helping them receive maximum benefit from their education. Remember nontraditional study was defined as a student-centered approach to education. It would seem that institutions in the CAEL Assembly have lived up to this definition, except that the target population is limited. Some groups are easier to cast into nontraditional modes than others. Here is a challenge. How can we design programs and learning assessment so that there are no differential rates in terms of student success between whites and blacks, lower and middle-class, or young and old?

Focus of experiential education programs

What I have to say about this topic may border on heresy. As far as I can tell, most CAEL and individual and institutional efforts have emphasized institutional needs and constraints over student needs and access. This could be because of the infant nature of experiential education. I would hope that in the very near future, projects and programs would be developed that have a student-based approach, in the form of access or outreach services for counseling students and providing information, so that students could find a match between their educational and lifelong learning needs and program offerings. Many of us have a pretty good idea about the panoply of nontraditional programs now functioning in higher education but prospective students do not. As a matter of fact, many individuals just have an inkling that they may be prospective students, but they do not know how to go about planning an educational program and finally finding an institution that can assimilate them and respond to their needs.

Defining of criteria of success for experiential learning programs

I am in total agreement with the idea that has been repeated here several times. Nontraditional education indicates nontraditional outcomes and criteria of success. I am sure we will be delineating these criteria and finding methods to measure these outcomes in the next several years. However, I will run the risk of being labeled as an "elitist" (though I feel I am not) by reminding you that the health and vitality of such new programs as described here today will be dependent on some traditional readings.

From our experience in CAEL, we know that students and institutions are deeply concerned about the acceptability and negotiability of non-traditional credentials. Acceptability has to do with further education in terms of getting admitted to a graduate or professional program, doing better than average in the program, or completing the program. Negotiability, in occupational terms, could mean getting a new job, a raise, a promotion, or meeting professional requirements for licensure. Clearly, we need to know whether a nontraditional degree that usually produces an atypical transcript is truly the coin of the realm. I am not saying that some of the criteria mentioned by Dave are irrelevant. They are important. However, to protect and ensure the future of the students at institutions such as Metropolitan State, Empire State, and the University of Mid America and to prolong the lives of new educational programs, we first have to know more about the acceptability and negotiability of nontraditional degrees.

In conclusion, perhaps I have acted as a neocritic and emphasized negative impressions over positive ones even though I feel the gains in this area have been great. However, with the press of reduced funding and rise of anti-nontraditional feeling in education, I think some critical introspection on our part is needed.